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The Washington Post

April 3, 1994, Sunday, Final Edition

SECTION: EDITORIAL; PAGE C8; CLOSE TO HOME

LENGTH: 759 words

HEADLINE: The Secret Ingredient in Cooke's Stadium Recipe: Our Money

SERIES: Occasional

BODY:

Lost in the happy talk about the Redskins coming to Maryland was a tentative victory for Maryland taxpayers: Gov. Schaefer and legislative leaders declined to endorse public subsidies for Jack Kent Cooke's proposed stadium in Laurel.

Faced with an independent study projecting more than \$ 186 million in road costs to avoid hours of gridlock on I-95, Route 1 and the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, they deferred considerations of taxpayer subsidies until the project has survived zoning, environmental and other reviews. Nonetheless, the battle to protect taxpayers from a raid on Maryland's treasury is far from over.

Earlier this year, the rattling of Cooke's tin cup was almost drowned out by the stampede of other supplicants looking for handouts for their sports teams. At one point, Maryland's treasury was targeted to subsidize two National Football League stadiums (one in Laurel, one in Baltimore), a hockey and basketball arena, a Canadian Football League team in Baltimore, a multi-sport arena in Baltimore, a 10,000-seat expansion of the Orioles stadium and a minor league baseball team on the Eastern Shore. Before doling out dollars, the state must take a hard look at each of these plans.

Cooke says that instead of our spending millions in public funds on a football stadium in Baltimore, he will give us one for free in Laurel. On closer inspection, "free" turns out to be a relative term.

Cooke has offered to pay for the stadium but not for the expanded transportation access that the stadium will need. The consultant's report issued last month estimated "initial" costs at \$ 51 million and eventual costs at \$ 186 million. The \$ 51 million down payment is more than four times the cost of the University of Maryland classroom building that is a top legislative priority. For the eventual figure of \$ 186 million, Maryland could build 37 elementary schools.

The consultant's study of road, transit and other costs of the proposed stadium also did not include the impact of other facilities for basketball and hockey. A Meadowlands-style sports complex at Laurel is obviously attractive to Cooke and to the owner of nearby Laurel Race Course. Given the wastefulness of spending tens or hundreds of millions to improve transportation for 10 Sunday afternoons, a multi-sports complex may entice government planners too.

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But the resulting congestion would be enormous. The Bullets play 41 home games, 23 on weeknights. The Capitals are home 41 times a year. Before Maryland makes Laurel the sports mecca of the mid-Atlantic, it should consider the impact. A few extra MARC commuter trains and encouraging fans to drive on the shoulder of Route 198 wouldn't do the job.

After taxpayers have spent more than \$ 7.7 billion to build a Metro system that takes almost a fourth of Redskins fans to RFK stadium, isn't it fiscally irresponsible to move the stadium off the Metro line? Building new infrastructure in the far suburbs rather than using existing facilities is the high-cost strategy.

A stadium at Laurel will have intangible costs as well. According to the state's independent traffic consultant, 66,000 extra people will take to the roads in Maryland every game day. These cars will fill the air with smog and carbon monoxide. Additionally, the new roads and parking lots built for the sports complex will increase the runoff of pollutants into the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

Tens of millions that would be spent to support a stadium, either in Laurel or Baltimore, would create construction jobs, but so would the same amount spent on building public schools. A football team creates jobs for ticket takers and hot dog vendors; a school creates jobs for teachers. A football team entertains, but it does not increase productivity or raise living standards. In contrast, schools increase the productivity of young people and, thus, their living standards. Schools create long-term economic benefits for students and for all Marylanders.

The choice between spending tax dollars on professional football and spending them on education is essentially a choice between consumption and investment. For a country that has an investment rate and an educational performance that rank below international competitors, the fiscally prudent and economically sound choice should be evident. Let's stop the feeding frenzy and put our kids -- and our taxpayers -- first. -- Jim Rosapepe -- Brian Frosh are, respectively, a Democratic delegate from Prince George's County and a Democratic delegate from Montgomery County.

LOAD-DATE: April 3, 1994